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SUBJECT: QATARI WOMEN ON ELECTION ISSUES

¶1. Summary. The political section recently met with a group of Qatari women as part of Post's outreach activities to Qatari women in support of their efforts to realize broad political participation in society. Young and old women from various professional backgrounds credited Sheikha Mozah, wife of the Amir, with opening their political horizons and easing cultural barriers to women's political participation. They critiqued current election training programs for excluding men, observing that including men in these trainings would facilitate broader acceptance of women's political participation. Finally, they expressed optimism that women would be elected to the Advisory Council in the upcoming elections and were eager for more election training opportunities. End Summary.

Tea with the Ladies

¶2. A recent gathering with Qatari women included professors and students from Qatar University, a candidate in the first municipal elections, a member of Qatar's Permanent Election Committee, members of the Supreme Council for Family Affairs and legal experts from the Ministry of Justice. In a discussion lasting almost three hours, the women spoke unreservedly and animatedly about their role in society, their political experiences, the barriers they've encountered, and their predictions for the upcoming legislative elections.

A Top-Down Approach

¶3. All the women believe that Qatar's tribal heritage, which utilizes a hierarchical, top-down approach to ruling and decision-making, dictates that change, to be effective and swift, must come from the top. Without gestures from the top leadership, women cannot play a greater and active political role in Qatar. To this end, the women asserted that they owed their political activity and conscience to Sheikha Mozah, the wife of the Amir. They credited her with opening the horizons of Qatari women. Sheikha Mozah first took the lead by appearing in public and at various social functions and later by promoting educational reform and education for girls and women. Her efforts have legitimated an expanded and more substantive role for women in society. In short, Sheikha Mozah eased the social and cultural barriers that Qatari women faced and which prevented them from playing a more active and effective role in society.

Weaknesses of Current Training Workshops

¶4. Of the twelve Qatari women at the gathering, seven had participated in awareness campaign workshops sponsored by the

Permanent Elections Committee and Supreme Council for Family Affairs. These workshops were delivered by Smart Global, a local consultant company, that provides election training and other services. The participants described the various shortcomings of the workshops. The format of the workshops was not conducive to promoting feedback from and exchanges amongst the women; the women found the lectures somewhat dull and not instructive; and the organizers did not incorporate a follow-up program in the training. A follow-up program would provide not only ongoing information and support to the participants but also a mechanism for assessing the effectiveness of the training.

Targeted Training

¶15. Another weakness of the workshops stemmed from the manner in which invitees were notified. Although the workshops were billed as being open to all women, in actuality invitations went out only to select women. The women questioned why some women were invited and others were not. One professor, who was unaware that these workshops were taking place, objected to no receiving an invitation and wanted to know the basis for deciding who got to attend the workshops. The member of the Permanent Elections Committee asserted that the workshops were advertised broadly and well in advance of being held, but in fact, that was not the case. At most, a small announcement of the workshops appeared in local papers two days prior to the event. Many of the women also expressed concern that the same women were repeatedly targeted for training.

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Where are the Men?

¶16. The women also objected to the lack of involvement of men in these training workshops. The women observed that excluding men from these exercises did everyone a disservice and undermined women's chances at full participation in the elections. Given that Qatari society is tribal and male-dominated, training programs should involve both men and women as a means of facilitating interaction between both groups, they argued. Mixed workshops provide the opportunity for both sexes to exchange viewpoints and openly discuss the concerns that men have about women holding legislative office. Only through open dialogue could there be any hopes of resolving these apprehensions and fostering a change in mentality. Including men in these training sessions would demystify the issue itself and facilitate broader acceptance for women's political participation. Lastly, men have to be equally engaged in this educational process as they too need to understand the importance of participating in elections.

Religion and Women's Political Empowerment

¶17. Some of the more religiously conservative women were outspoken about the capabilities of their sex. They acknowledged that women have been appointed to high ranking posts simply to present a positive image of women's empowerment and strides in democratic reform. However, they were quick to point out that women are capable of holding and functioning in sensitive leadership positions. They further observed that there are no religious restrictions preventing women from holding high legislative or executive positions.

Golden Era of Women

¶18. The women at the gathering described the present time as

the "Golden Era of Women" in Qatar. Qatari women are making a difference in society, and those appointed to key positions, as well as the woman elected in the second municipal council elections, have become positive examples of the capabilities of women and have advanced society's belief in women's abilities. Some women advocated for an official policy on appointing women to the Advisory Council. Given that society still has some maturing to do before reaching the point where it fully accepts women in political positions, a policy of appointing women would ensure women's presence in the legislative body. Those concerns notwithstanding, many of the participants were optimistic about the outcome of the legislative elections, stating they expected to see a few women elected to the Advisory Council.

Recommendations

19. At the conclusion of the gathering the women were eager to share their recommendations of the types of training that would find beneficial. They reiterated their belief that workshops should be inclusive and not exclusive. Men must be included in all trainings. They expressed the need to involve the local public university more consistently in election preparation and education as the student university population represents a significant number of potential voters. They suggested more workshops and training and lectures for academic credit as a means of ensuring maximum attendance at these events. Others suggested a greater role for imams, given their influence in society. Imams could raise the issue of elections and women's political participation in their lectures and Friday sermons, thus promoting greater awareness of and conferring credibility on the issue.

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